

# A Stiring Novel, Conspiracy and Thrilling Adventure

eagerly as she would have taken any other course that would have led her nearer to her object.

On the following evening she went to the meeting in the same deliberate, purposeful manner. Some three or four other men were present, and they came to offer congratulations upon her betrothal to their comrade. She wished the fact of the betrothal to be spread abroad, knowing that when Gilbert Merridew heard of it and met her as Karl Hartman's future wife, it would do more than anything else to blind his eyes.

The hour for his coming arrived, and when the clock struck she moved herself for the ordeal of meeting him. Then the sound of footsteps told her he was coming.

"It is Gideon Mawford," said one of the men.

Oliver clutched her hands involuntarily and her heart quickened its beats. But outwardly she was as calm as a statue, and she turned to Karl and made some trifling remark in a casual tone that was without a quiver of nervousness.

But her eyes were fixed stealthily on the door, and as it opened, she caught her breath.

## CHAPTER XXI.

**Olga Schmidt, Under-Housemaid.**  
Oliver was not to meet Gilbert Merridew that night, however. The man who entered brought a message that he was unable to be present, and despite her courage she was glad of the respite.

It would be much better for her to have some further experience of the men among whom she had thus thrust herself before facing him, so that she might grow more accustomed to her assumed character.

"Who is this?" Oliver asked Karl, referring to the new arrival, a well-dressed young fellow, with a face which would have been prepossessing had it not been for the sinister expression of the eyes.

"Mawford's secretary, Abner Franks, an American. He lives with the boss at his chambers in Whitehall Avenue."

Here was another fact to be noted. It was obviously the place where Merridew lived as Mawford, and where the rest of the gang communicated with him. Oliver watched Franks closely as Karl and Rosenblatt and he held a whispered conference.

Presently he glanced round at her and a moment later crossed the room with Karl and held out his hand.

"Our comrade has told me the news, Fraulien," he answered in English. "Thank you, sir," she answered in broken English, and tried to look embarrassed.

"He is one of the best of us," he replied, smiling. "His smile was like a grimace and had the effect of making him almost repulsive, for his mouth was large and the thin lips drew away to the side while the under jaw seemed to close up, revealing a set of ugly discolored fangs of teeth."

"I have told Mr. Franks that you will join us, Rosa," said Karl.

"I am sure we could not have a better ally, Fraulien," said Franks, who had been closely scrutinizing Oliver the while.

"I shall do my best," she said. "I will tell you what has to be done."

They moved over together, and Franks explained the instructions he had received from Gideon Mawford.

"Is not the Herr coming himself?" asked Oliver.

"No. He has important business—our business," he replied. "It is all arranged for you to go to the house to-morrow. You will go as Olga Schmidt, and you will be an under-housemaid."

"But my character, my—," and as if she could not explain herself easily in English she turned and spoke rapidly to Karl in German, that she would need to give a reference.

"Oh, we've made that all right," answered Franks, when this was translated to him. "Madame has done that, of course," he added.

"Madame? Who is Madame?" asked Oliver.

"Madame Boncourt," replied Franks. "But you speak English, don't you?"

"Oh, yes, well, and understand; but not so well as my own language," she answered with a smile.

"Well, what you have to do is this: The Minister will return from Berlin in about two days and brings back with him his secretary, the Hon. John Fenwick. In the meantime, you must get the run of the house. What is that?"

"The run of the house? What is that?" Oliver crinkled up her brow in perplexity.

"Find out everything that concerns the way in which papers are brought to the house from the Foreign Office; who brings them; where they are taken; where the Minister does his business relating to them, at what hours; whom he sees; whether, if not, alone when he reads them; if taken back to the office, and whether they are ever left in this."

"It is very simple," declared Oliver with a shrug. "A child could do it. I thought I was to get some papers."

"Oh, no. Those which we have to get are sure to be kept at the Foreign Office. But we have to get all this information in order to make our plans to find the opportunity we need."

Oliver laughed lightly. "I thought there was something difficult to do," she said to Karl. "Dangerous, perhaps; but this!" and she threw up her hands.

"How long do I remain here?"

"Until you have found out what we wish. You will have some time off, and then you can meet Karl and tell him. You won't mind that part, at any rate," he added with his unpleasant smile.

"I shall wear some dress of a servant."

out, even to the matter of her clothes. An arranged in advance. Certainly this was evidence of a woman's hand in the plans; and she sat wondering how she could have contrived to get a servant into a house of the sort; and whether it could have been done without some aid inside the house itself.

She felt intense curiosity to see the woman who had done this and she resolved to question Karl at the earliest opportunity.

After a time the man Franks crossed to her and bade her good night; he returned a congratulation upon her betrothal and she was almost as fortunate as Karl in having secured her aid.

"Do this well, Fraulien, and there will be ample work for you in the future. But I know you will do your utmost for Karl's sake. I shall tell Mr. Mawford the high opinion I have formed of our new comrade."

Karl himself was in high spirits at the result of the meeting; and as they returned to the little house in Brixton he was full of the success Oliver had scored.

"There is something I don't understand," said Oliver after a while. "Why is that Mr. Franks so much better money than the rest? Has he more money? Where is this Whitehall Avenue where he lives with Mr. Mawford?"

"It is only dress, Rosa," he replied. "We all share alike in everything. But some of us appear to be rich and live in the society to find the work for us all to do."

"Do you really mean that you share everything—everything you have?"

"I will tell you. We once had a man from Denver, a shrewd, clever man, who put us on to a good many things in the old time in Colorado. We all liked him, too. But he went crooked at last. We found he was getting money, plenty of it, and keeping it out by accident. Cooper was the leader in those days, and he told us. His eyes had a steady light as he said, 'An expression Oliver had not seen in them before.'"

"Well," she asked as he paused, "was not well with him?" he answered with a short, significant laugh. "We taxed him with it; he lied; we proved it; and—well, Gideon shot him. Since then there has been no trouble of that sort. I can assure you."

Oliver felt a chill at the story and the one in which it was told; but she answered in a hard, unfeeling voice: "Served him right. He was a traitor. But I suppose you mean you share only the proceeds of your—of your work. Not what each gets in any other way?"

"Oh, yes, indeed. Everything to the last dollar, no matter where it comes from. We have got it. It is a brotherhood, and we are all a man."

"Then what little I have would be shared?"

"If we needed it, yes," he said very decidedly. "Without that law we could not work together. But it would be much, I'm afraid, Rosa," he laughed.

"No. I wish I were rich," she said slowly.

"I don't; for then I might never have known you."

There was a long pause, during which Oliver was thinking of Gilbert Merridew's act in shooting his leader for the very selfsame thing he himself was now doing. And this Madame Boncourt, Karl, who is she?" she asked at length.

"A woman of genius Rosa, as you will say when you meet her. She was a woman, parts and all successful. She plans all the big things we do and works so cleverly that rarely ever do we fail now. It wasn't always so. She has much more money than the rest of us; she is the one exception. But it is necessary because she had to appear to be a leader in the confidence of those from whom she gains the knowledge that helps us."

"What is she like, Karl?"

"Curious, eh?" he laughed. "I am not good at describing. She is little, dark, ordinary looking. But she is clever. A genius, I tell you. Sometimes she plans all the big things we do and works so cleverly that rarely ever do we fail now. It wasn't always so. She has much more money than the rest of us; she is the one exception. But it is necessary because she had to appear to be a leader in the confidence of those from whom she gains the knowledge that helps us."

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his "session of her father's fortune. Already she knew enough to put him in her power. But how could she use the knowledge to drag him to her? She must get face to face with him alone for that purpose, and the opportunity would come, must come, and soon; and the thought encouraged and spurred her for the work she had so readily undertaken for these men.

She had put her hand to the plough, and she would not stop to look back; she resolved, and on the following day her spirits were as high as her courage while she completed the few remaining arrangements she had to make for her adoption of the role of Olga Schmidt, the under-housemaid.

The day in earnest. She would go to the house because that was necessary for her continuance with these men; but she would not content herself with doing the work assigned to her in the household and then make any report, while she appeared suitable, it would be easy to say that she was too closely watched to find out much.

One very unpleasant ordeal she had to pass through. When she left the house Karl insisted upon kissing her, and appeared intensely disappointed that she did not respond with the warmth he expected.

"I am agitated, Karl. You don't understand," she told him. "And I know I am not demonstrative; but ah, Karl, you will see."

And she made up in glances for the fervor which she had appeared to withhold. The embrace to which she had forced herself to submit.

"It had to be done, of course," she said to herself, when she was in the train. "But, ugh, I didn't bargain for that!" and she rubbed the spot where his lips had touched her cheek as if to erase both the touch and the memory of it.

"I shall have to break off the engagement. I know I shall." And she shuddered again.

But she was quite herself when she stood on the steps of the big house in South Kensington and rang the bell.

A tall footman opened the door and stared at her.

"I wish to see Mrs. Grimson, the housekeeper. I am Olga Schmidt, the new housemaid," she said, in her broken English.

His head went up in the air with offended dignity. "The new housemaid, eh? Then why didn't you go to the hall? Bring me up here, and go down stairs."

And very submissively Olga Schmidt did as she was told.

## CHAPTER XXII.

**An Awkward Meeting.**  
It was such an evident strain upon the dignity of the pompous footman to take notice of such a person as an under-housemaid, that he was quite relieved when he pointed at the door and told her it was the "housekeeper's room."

Ignorant of the etiquette of the servants' hall, she knocked, and then waited to be told to enter, and when no response came, she knocked again. The door was jerked open from within and a fair face, with a wonky, expression glared at her questioning, and then opened the battery of a furious volley of words.

"Goodness, gracious me, whatever are you standing staring there for like that at me? Why didn't you come in when I called, and whatever is it you want now? One would think you people had nothing on earth better to do than to come worrying me with every sort of nonsense. Have you no tongue, that you stand there like a mummy with its bandages on?"

"I am the new under-housemaid, ma'am, Olga Schmidt," said Oliver, humbly.

"Oh, that's it, is it? Well, you don't look a very promising subject; and as for your talk, it's outlandish; that's what it is. Nothing else in this world, as anybody can hear. But perhaps you're better than your looks and your talk; I'm sure I hope you are. But I'm equally sure I shan't be a bit surprised to find out that it's another of those fine characters and nothing but a hind."

Oliver stood with her eyes riveted on the woman, firmly repressing an inclination to laugh. It appeared to be impossible for her to check the rush of words. The questions came from her not one at a time, but by the half dozen, and she allowed time for each to be answered.

August with no chance of getting a day before the next edition was published, and in the end she grumbled because

Oliver had not replied to them all.

It appeared, however, that having quarreled with the girl who had had the place last, Mrs. Grimson had been compelled to seek another in a hurry and without a personal interview; and hence Olga Schmidt was so suddenly an experiment and taken on trial.

All this came out in the midst of a torrent of instructions about the work to be done, Mrs. Grimson's personal grievances, the shortcomings of the other servants, and the troubles of life in general.

In regard, Mrs. Grimson, as Oliver said, in an instant, was utterly unfit for the position she held—the work of directing the household was beyond her, and the result was that matters were always in a more or less chaotic condition. She never used one word where fifty would do; she never had a clear idea of what she wanted; and it was so never explained anything clearly; she was constantly changing her mind and issuing absolutely contrary orders, and invariably put the blame of her own incompetence upon the servants.

It was a condition which suited Olga's work well enough. There was never any need to do more than be possible to wander all over the house at any time without the least remark being made by any one. The servants either did their work or left it undone as they pleased, and were always able to cite some ridiculous order of the housekeeper in excuse. They were always doing and undoing, and the couple of days Oliver had all the information she needed.

The minister's wife was an invalid and spent nearly all her time in her rooms, generally on her back. The minister himself rarely went to bed before 3 or 4 o'clock in the morning, and he was up at 6 o'clock, and he scarcely ever went to Downing Street before the afternoon, and in the morning papers were brought to him—generally by Mr. Fenwick—and he dealt with them in the study which adjoined his bedroom.

In the meantime Oliver set about the work assigned to her very quietly; she never interfered with any of the other servants raised upon her by the simple device of answering in such broken English that they could not understand her, and was most careful not to give offence to any one.

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"This was when granting Oliver's request to be allowed to go out on the following afternoon. Jack had been back for some days, and she was anxious to see him, and she wrote him to meet her at the Robinsons.

As soon as she was well away from the big house she jumped into a cab and drove to the house where her clothes were, changed into Oliver Parmenter once more, and hurried to Chelsea.

When Jack arrived he was eager to learn what she had been doing in his absence. He had called for her immediately on his return, and had been told that she was away and that the Robinsons did not know her address.

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"Against any open attack, yes, of course; but this is aimed at your official career. There is a plot on hand to steal some important papers from the Foreign Office, and to put the thing on you. You go to the Robinsons to the minister's house in South Kensington."

"I'll do it all the will in the world to help him. Jack would never consent to the course she was now taking. Fear for her would, as she had told him, lead him to take some steps which would ruin the whole enterprise. And this must be prevented, whatever the cost to her. Even his displeasure, and her own made a severe test, but she was pleased—must not affect her decision."

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